

# Vintage Postcards as Historical Images

## Ghosts from the Gipper's Era

Postcards are an excellent source of historical images, even of our sporting past. Often the only pictures that can be found of old buildings, street scenes, expositions or sports venues are on cards buried in a trunk in Aunt Minnie's attic. Postcard collectors usually specialize. Some are interested in views of a particular geographical location, perhaps their hometown, a scenic or vacation area, or a particular state. Others may zero in on specific topics: amusement parks, world's fairs, people, sports, main street views, ships or trains. If a train appears on a card, the price may double. Pictures of old sports stadiums (or stadia if you prefer) also tend to command high prices.

### *Postcard Images of our Sporting Past*

Vintage postcards of athletic events and venues, although not nearly as common as trains or main street views, exist, providing historians, architectural preservationists, and anthropologists a "snapshot" of the past. A separate hobby has evolved around cards depicting players (e.g., baseball cards), but these are not postcards. An interesting early sports postcard set was published by the Boston Post-Card Company for the 1905 Ivy League football season. These cards depicted portraits of the players of each team arranged like the spots on a domino (hence called by the publisher "Dominoe Cards").

One game represented was a controversial Harvard-Yale game that almost led to the demise of college football due to an incident on the field between opposing players. College football was saved after President Theodore Roosevelt called a conference that rewrote the rules of the game. Views of sports arenas from the pioneer era (1893-1898) or golden age (1898-1915) of postcard production are rare, but are fairly common

from the linen era card (1930-1940s).

Professional football is a more recent sport than professional baseball; hence professional football stadiums appear mostly on newer color photo cards. However, many linen era cards can be found of college football stadiums; to list a few, the Rose Bowl, Princeton's Palmer Stadium, Cornell's Shoellkoff Stadium, the Yale Bowl and Harvard Stadium—alternate sites of the boisterous Harvard-Yale rivalry, and the Notre Dame Stadium in South Bend. But Knute Rockne's inspirational plea "to win one for the Gipper" took place at halftime during the 1928 Notre Dame-Army game played not in South Bend or West Point, but in Yankee Stadium as the Fighting Irish played their arch rivals, Army, in Yankee Stadium from 1925 to 1946.

Some of us can remember when life was simple and there were only 16 baseball teams in the major leagues. Only three of the nostalgic stadiums of that era remain: Boston's Fenway Park (1912) with its notorious "Green Monster" outfield wall; Chicago's Wrigley Field (1914) with its ivy-covered red brick walls; and New York's Yankee Stadium (1923), "the House that Ruth Built," home of the feared Bronx Bombers. The other stadiums are gone, and postcard views command good prices. Who can forget Ebbets Field (1913-1957) where Jackie Robinson broke

*Aerial view of Ebbets Field, Brooklyn, New York. The Dodgers played in Ebbets Field from 1913 to 1957. Linen era card.*



the color barrier and home of “dem bums,” the Brooklyn Dodgers (so named because Brooklynites were nicknamed “trolley dodgers” after the borough’s slow horse cars were replaced by faster electric trolley cars). Indeed, the tears and moans that went up when the team moved west in 1958 can still be heard. And what Dodger fan can forget New York’s Polo Grounds (1912-1963) where Bobby Thomson’s shot heard around the world dashed the bum’s 1951 World Series hope and where the “Amazin’s,” the New York Mets, started life in 1962. Gone too are Philly’s Shibe (Connie Mack) Park (1909-1970); Boston’s Braves Field (1915-1952)—yes, the Braves were once in Beantown; Chicago’s old Comiskey Park (1910-1990); Cincinnati’s Crosley Field (1912-1970), home of Johnny Vander Meer’s consecutive no-hitters; Pittsburgh’s Forbes Field (1909-1970); and only last year, Detroit’s Tiger Stadium (1912-1999) bit the dust.

Sports stadiums are notoriously short-lived. Twenty-five years is old. Due to changing economics, obsolete designs, and new desires, most of the new stadiums of the early expansion days have been replaced. Stadiums designed for baseball and football compromised too much and failed. Owners sought new revenue sources from premium-priced luxury boxes for corporate customers, television franchises, and naming rights, while patrons wanted column-free sight lines and the intimate ambience of the old fields, not the sterility of a large concrete bowl. After brief lives, baseball has left San Francisco’s windy Candlestick (3Com) Park (1960-1999), Houston’s sunless Astrodome (1965-1999), and Seattle’s Kingdome (1977-1999) for newer fields; and Minnesota’s Metropolitan Stadium (1961-

White border era card of Notre Dame Stadium, home of the Fighting Irish, c. 1933.



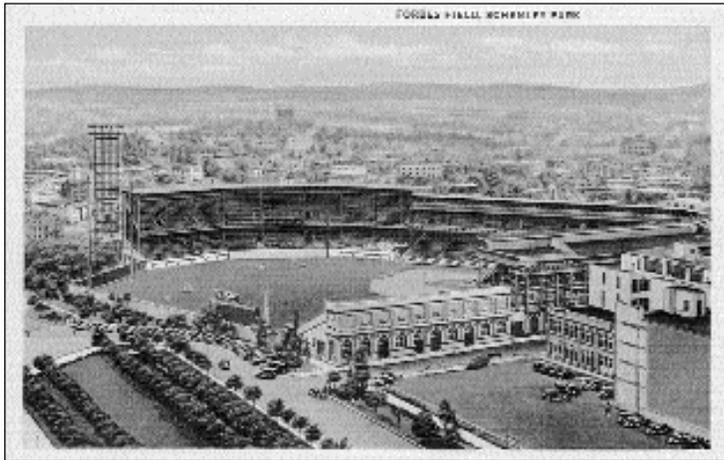
1981) was displaced by the country’s largest shopping mall. Even the New York Met’s Shea Stadium (1964) may soon be replaced by a Camden Yards imitation.

When stadiums disappear, postcard views become collector’s items. A postcard collection can also record changes to stadiums over time. To increase seating capacity and attendance, stadiums get enlarged and altered, decks are added and lights are installed for night games. Sometimes, as in the case of Yankee Stadium in 1976, a stadium gets completely renovated, changing its appearance. An early postcard of the Polo Grounds about the time it opened in 1912, for example, shows emblems of the eight National League teams mounted on the roof frieze. A much later picture (c. 1950s) shows that they had been removed during a renovation. Compare a linen era card (1930-1940s) of Yankee Stadium with a modern photo card, and you can see the changes resulting from the 1976 renovation. Postcard views can also show a stadium’s setting in the urban environment. A card of an early ballpark, Ebbett’s Field (1913-1957) for example, will show it as part of the urban fabric. A card of the St. Louis Busch Memorial Stadium (1966) will show its relation to the Mississippi River and the Gateway Arch. And a card of Dodger Stadium (1962) will show it rising from an endless parking lot surrounded by a sea of cars.

### Postcard Collections

A century ago, long before the advent of pocket-sized point-and-shoot cameras, camcorders, digital imaging, and pictures by email, the picture postcard was king. Visitors to Chicago’s 1893 Columbian Exposition mailed souvenir postal cards all over the world and enthusiasts have been amassing postcard collections ever since. As a measure of their popularity, in a single day in 1906, some 200,000 postcards were reportedly mailed from Brooklyn’s Coney Island alone! In the heyday of the postcard craze, over a billion cards were sold annually. The hobby of collecting postcards even has its own name, *deltiology*, and collectors are *deltiologists*, although some purists refer to a deltiologist as one who is interested in the history of postcards and a collector as a deltiophile. The words derive from the Greek, meaning a collector of small writings or pictures.

Where does one find vintage postcards? Many dealers set up tables at flea markets,



*Forbes Field, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Pirates played in Forbes Field from 1909 to 1970. Linen era card from a souvenir folder.*

antique or ephemera (paper) shows; the fancier the show, the higher the prices. Auctions are often fruitful sources. There are many postcard clubs in the United States and these clubs often have public shows. You frequently run across the same dealers as they move from show to show. You can bargain with some dealers and not others. Most give a discount for large purchases. The price of cards can range from as low as a few dollars, to 10, 20, or even 50 dollars or more, depending on the subject, condition and scarcity. Shop around at a show. A card may be four dollars at one table and the identical card 10 dollars at another. Condition is important. However, a postcard collector may overlook the condition if the card is scarce or is needed to add to a collection.

The list of topics is virtually endless, varying from disasters to political and social subjects to greetings. Greeting cards include not only holiday greetings, but also greetings from a particular place (e.g., "Greetings from Niagara Falls"). The German "Gruss Aus" cards are especially popular. While some collectors eye the stamps or unique cancellations, a true deltiologist shows more interest in the subject, not the stamp. Most postcards are printed on cardboard, but other materials such as leather, wood and even metal, have been used.

A number of artists made their living producing pictures specifically for postcards. One of the most popular "signed" artists was Ellen Clapsaddle (1865-1934) who produced thousands of cards bearing delightful pictures of children. She is one of my favorites if only because she was a tenant in my grandmother's rooming house in New York City when I was a child. Another early favorite artist whose cards are

sought by collectors was Frances Brundage (1854-1937), but there were many others as well.

### **Postcard History**

Postcard history is evolutionary. The idea of sending a piece of cardboard through the mail seems to have originated in the 1860s in Austria and other European countries. However, these were not picture postcards, but cards with blank backs reserved for messages, provided the writer did not care who read the message. Cards were cheaper than paper and postage was often calculated by the number of sheets mailed. The concept took off in the United States in 1861 when H. L. Lipman of Philadelphia began privately printing cards that could be mailed once a stamp was affixed. One side (front) was left blank for a message, the other side (back) for the address; companies quickly caught on that printing messages or illustrations on the backs of cards (advertising cards) was an inexpensive way to advertise their products to a larger audience. The United States government issued its first postal card on May 13, 1873, a forerunner of today's United State Postal Service's postal card, except that the "penny" card now sells in a post office for 21 cents (a penny for the card, 20 cents for postage). These early postal cards, too, were mostly used for advertising, and there are many collectors who specialize in collecting advertising cards. But it was the 1893 Chicago World's Fair that started the picture postcard frenzy.

Understanding the developmental sequence of postcards—size, materials, colors, etc., over time—can date a postcard and its image.

### **Pioneer Era (1893-1898)**

The 1893 Columbian Exposition kicked off the five-year pioneer era of picture postcards. At that time, the U.S. Post Office enjoyed a monopoly on post(al) cards, as only government printed cards could be mailed for the one-cent rate. Privately printed cards, however, could be sent through the mail, but at the higher letter rate of two cents. (The distinction between postal cards and postcards is that postal cards are government issued with pre-printed postage, while postcards are privately printed and require stamps to be affixed.) The backs of cards were still undivided and intended only for writing the name and address. Deltiologists refer to these cards as "undivided backs." As messages were not allowed on the back, many cards of this era often have writing on the front below or alongside the picture. Frequently the writing was more interesting

than the picture. Cards of this era were often called souvenir cards or mail cards. For the Columbian Exposition, Charles Goldsmith, using government postal stock, printed several sets of official souvenir postcards bearing pictures of the exposition's grounds and buildings on the front. These cards, in essence the first picture postcards in America, were extremely popular, and the picture postcard craze took off like a rocket.

#### ***The Golden Age of Postcards (1898-1915)***

The best and most collectable postcards were produced in the golden age of postcards. Printing and coloring were of high quality and these cards are in high demand. The golden age began with the passage of the Private Mailing Card Act of 1898, which allowed privately produced cards to be mailed for one-cent, thus stimulating production and demand. Still, no messages were allowed on the back, which remained undivided for the address only. Until 1901, these cards were required to carry the notation, "Private Mailing Card, Authorized by Act of Congress, May 19, 1898." But on December 24, 1901, the law was amended to allow the use of words "Post Card" instead. Finally, on March 1, 1907, the undivided back requirement was dropped and to this day postcards have a vertical line dividing the back, the left side for a message, the right side for the address. Deltiologists refer to post-1907 cards as "divided backs." Pre-1900 cards are rare.

The golden age of postcards continued until about 1915 when World War I intervened. Many of the cards of this period were printed in

Europe, especially in Germany, where the quality of printing was high. The cards were hand-colored, although at times the colorer's imagination went a bit wild as to the true colors. Sometimes the printer would delete an object to make the picture look better or less cluttered. A person or a vehicle might be erased, or non-existent flagpoles might miraculously appear. Hence it is not uncommon to find a scene on one card and obviously the same scene on another card with everything identical (e.g., all the people having exactly the same pose), but with some object, perhaps a wagon, removed with its shadow remaining. Thus one must be careful in using old postcards as a source of historically correct images. Postcard collecting was very popular during the golden age and special albums were sold to keep collections organized instead of being stuffed into shoeboxes. No parlor was respectable unless there was a postcard album on the equivalent of a coffee table.

Many companies jumped on the postcard bandwagon. One of the most prolific producers of postcards was the Detroit Publishing Company, which printed thousands (one source says 16,000) of splendid cards using a special color process they called "photstint," an adaptation of a secret Swiss process. The quality of Detroit's view cards depicting cities and scenic areas of the country, especially the West, are excellent. The western views were photographed by William Henry Jackson, a well-known landscape photographer who some call "the father of the picture postcard." Jackson joined the company and left a legacy of 40,000 glass negatives. The Rotograph Company was another publisher of high quality view cards. Both their black and white and color cards of city views are especially crisp. An English company, Raphael Tuck & Sons, also produced quality cards for the American market. A favorite of many collectors, Tuck published cards on many topics, such as a series on New York City. Especially popular are their "Oilette" cards, which resemble oil paintings and were produced by Tuck's many artists. But dozens of other companies also participated in the postcard publishing business. Where the market was too small for a publisher, local photographers filled the gap making postcards from their photographs (called "real photo" cards), sometimes

*Modern era chrome card of Dodger Stadium, Los Angeles, California. The Dodgers have played here since 1962 following their move from Brooklyn, New York, in 1958.*





*Linen era card of Yankee Stadium before installation of the lights in 1946 and before 1976 renovation. Home of the Bronx Bombers since 1923.*

even sending the negatives to Germany for printing. Real Photo cards of small towns are highly collectable.

#### **The White Border Era (1915-1930)**

After the German supply was cut off, postcards were printed in the United States. Quality went downhill as American producers used cheap printing processes. They also skimped on the amount of ink used by placing a white border around the card. Colors were poor and the images were often not sharp and distinct.

Collectors often shun these cards, but nevertheless white border cards may be the only source of a picture of a particular subject. Obviously, prices tend to be lower than golden age cards. The white border era lasted until the Depression.

#### **The Linen Era (1930-1940s)**

With the onset of the Depression, card producers changed to a card with a high rag content which gave the card a linen-like texture. But overall quality of the cards did not improve as cheap gaudy ink was used. Images continued to be fuzzy and unclear. Yet millions of these cards were printed until after World War II. These cards are very common and usually fairly inexpensive. Again, a linen card may be the only source of an image of a particular subject. Collectors of stadiums and sports venues will find more cards available from this era.

#### **The Modern Era (1940s-present)**

Improvements in color photography and printing made the linen card obsolete. In 1939, the Union Oil Company issued a series of colored postcards using a process called photochrome. After Kodachrome film became popular,

this era was sometimes called the chrome era. With continued advances in color photography, virtually all cards today are essentially high quality glossy color photographs that are inexpensive to produce. Images are true representations of the subject. These cards are collectable, but because they are new and depict subjects that largely still exist, they can hardly be called vintage postcards. Accordingly, demand and prices are low. Anyone with an inexpensive point-and-shoot camera can take their own pictures as good as those on modern postcards and have them developed in an hour. But as time passes, these cards too will be valuable records of today's world. When Shea Stadium is gone and Camden Yards is replaced (if historical trends are any indication, it will be some day), today's cards will be a valuable historical resource.

Yes, postcards can remind us of the age of the Gipper, the Bambino, and dem bums. Postcards of stadiums, sporting events, and grandstands can provide evidence of vanished structures, missing architectural elements, and neighborhood landscapes.

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